

THE BIG THICKET: PRISTINE WILDERNESS OR ARCHEOLOGICALLY UNDERSTUDIED?

Michael H. MacRoberts and Barbara R. MacRoberts

*Bog Research, 740 Columbia, Shreveport, Louisiana 71104, U.S.A. and
Herbarium, Museum of Life Sciences
Louisiana State University in Shreveport
Shreveport, Louisiana 71115, U.S.A.*

ABSTRACT

Received opinion is that the Big Thicket of east Texas was uninhabited until the early nineteenth century. It was a pristine wilderness. This view is supported neither by archeological data nor historical records.

RESUMEN

La opinión aceptada es que el Big Thicket del este de Texas estuvo deshabitado hasta principios del siglo diez y nueve. Era una tierra virgen pristina. Este punto de vista no está apoyado ni en datos arqueológicos ni históricos.

Cozine (2004) and Callicott et al. (2006) maintain that the Big Thicket of east Texas was a wilderness prior to 1800. No one ever lived there. However, they do not cite any archeological sources in support of this position. We therefore undertook a study to determine the validity of their position because we previously had discovered that many pronouncements about the Big Thicket are incorrect (MacRoberts & MacRoberts 2004, 2007; MacRoberts et al. 2007) and because in the “great wilderness debate” many authorities maintain that the North American continent was not a pristine wilderness in 1492 but instead was a landscape that had been highly modified by Native Americans (Callicott & Nelson 1998; Denevan 1998; McCann 1999a, 1999b; Bonnicksen 2000; Vale 2000; Williams 2000; Pyne 2001; Kay 2002; Mann 2005). However, some want it both ways. While Callicott et al. (2006:28) agree that colonists and explorers did not find a “howling wilderness” but a landscape “as much a cultural artifact as the one they left behind,” they also state that “of course, throughout North America tracts of wilderness were ... interspersed with more or less intensely peopled places.” According to them, one such wilderness was the Big Thicket (Callicott et al. 2006: 29). Native Americans made only occasional hunting forays into it and the Spanish found it inhospitable.

A survey of the archeological literature on Native American presence in the Big Thicket, including the Big Thicket National Preserve, shows that archeological work is virtually non-existent (Shafer 1968; Shafer et al. 1975; McClurkin 1968; Story 1990b; Bousmann et al. 2004; Ricklis 2004). Compared with other regions of Texas, the archeological coverage of the Big Thicket is minuscule (Perttula 2004). Ricklis (2004) makes this clear in his recent review of southeastern Texas archeology in which he barely mentions anything except coastal areas. We, therefore, contacted Texas archeologists to confirm our findings and obtain current information on archeology in the Big Thicket. Victor Galan (pers. comm.) wrote that of the surveys that have been conducted in the Big Thicket region, few cover enough area with adequate testing methods, still fewer have good stratigraphic information, and even fewer yet have been thoroughly excavated. One of the findings of early archeological surveys in the Big Thicket region was that there appeared to be relatively few sites (Shafer et al. 1975). Whether this paucity of sites was due to masking by dense ground cover, or was an accurate reflection of limited human use was not clear (Shafer et al. 1975; Story 1990a). Years later, Shafer (pers. comm. March 13, 2008) states:

“Given what I know now ... I am convinced that we missed a lot of sites in the Big Thicket. A big part of the reason was visibility, and the fact that we did not do shovel testing then. Also, I’m sure erosion removed some of the sites as well.”

Shafer (pers. comm., March 17, 2008) is currently of the opinion that the Big Thicket is archeologically understudied. There is, however, enough archeological evidence to indicate that man has been in the Big

Thicket since Paleoindian times (at least since 8,000 years ago) (Bousmann et al. 2004; Victor Galan pers. comm.).

The Spanish left a voluminous record of their presence in eastern Texas (Bolton 1914, 1915; Swanton 1942, 1946; Freeman 1990). The Spanish encountered Hasinai and Caddo tribes in the region of Nacogdoches and Natchitoches, and Attacapan tribes between Nacogdoches and the coast, mainly in the San Jacinto and Trinity river drainages (Bolton 1914, 1915; Swanton 1942, 1946; Perttula 1992). However, the Spanish had no interest in the eastern part of the Big Thicket (Newton, Jasper, Tyler and Hardin counties) because, rather than colonization, their aim was to prevent French encroachment by establishing forts and missions in areas where the French threatened. The French did not threaten the Big Thicket region, but threats existed north of the Big Thicket at Natchitoches and on the coast on the lower Trinity River. The Spanish repeatedly traveled across the western part of the Big Thicket (Polk, Liberty, San Jacinto counties) on their overland trips from Nacogdoches to their presidio and mission on the lower Trinity River (the Spanish appear to have never used waterways for travel). Consequently, the Spanish did not avoid the Big Thicket any more than they avoided other regions of Texas; they simply had no interest in the area.

In summary, the paucity of archeological research prevents any detailed understanding of Native American occupation of and impact on the Big Thicket. Until the Big Thicket is seriously explored archeologically, our understanding of Native American impact there will remain minimal. This, in turn, means that an understanding of Big Thicket “biocomplexity” (interrelation of “coupled human and natural systems”) (Callicott et al. 2006; Liu et al. 2007) will ultimately have to include the archeologist.

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